

# **KENTUCKY DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS STRATEGIC PLAN**

## **2012-2014**

### **Mission**

To work on behalf of Kentucky's veteran community and their families in recognition of their service and sacrifice to our state and nation and to aptly serve their needs in an honorable and dignified manner.

### **Vision**

That veterans of this Commonwealth, the men and women who served honorably on active duty with the U.S. Armed Forces, will receive the highest level of quality support, skilled nursing, and long-term care within our nursing homes, burial honors and respectful services within the confines of the state's veterans cemeteries, and deserved federal and state veteran benefits, including proper care for our homeless and disabled veterans.

### **Values**

The Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs (KDVA) is made up of a veteran centric, people oriented, forward leaning employee base with a high level of integrity and accountability, collaborative problem solving skills, and a commitment to excellence.

### **Strategic Goals**

Provide quality programs and delivery of services in an efficient and effective manner that will meet the needs and exceed the expectations of our veteran community.

- To provide premium advocacy for veterans and increase the percentage of service members in Kentucky receiving VA compensation and benefits earned.
- To provide first-class long term care services to veteran residents of our nursing home facilities in a manner that is both cost-effective and mindful of state supported funds.
- To provide a final resting place and dignified burial services for veterans and their spouses/dependents.
- To focus on veterans who are "at risk" of becoming homeless in order to reduce veteran homelessness in the state.
- To assist unemployed veterans with employment opportunities through job fairs and job retraining programs and by furthered support of veteran preference legislation.
- To focus on a strong partnership with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) and participate in outreach activities that benefit and promote Kentucky veterans.
- To satisfy internal and external customer needs and enhance qualitative outcomes.
- To communicate in a timely and effective manner with the public about KDVA services.

- To capitalize on opportunities and maximize efforts toward recruitment and retention of a quality, productive workforce.

## **Executive Summary**

Kentucky is home to more than 335,000 veterans. This is a sizeable portion and valued constituency of the Commonwealth's population. In FY 2012, Kentucky is expected to receive approximately \$17,441,500 from the USDVA and \$16,917,000 from the state's General Fund and \$8,897,700 from other sources for a total budget of \$43,256,200. Commissioner Ken Lucas, Major, Retired (USAF), heads the Department staffed by 771 employees to operate the Commissioner's office, three long term care facilities, four cemeteries, a veterans benefits branch, and homeless veterans program.

## **Programs**

**\*Commissioner's Office** is dedicated to advancing the mission, implementing the agency's vision and strategic goals, adhering to its values, and supporting Department workforce needs. The Commissioner's Office in Frankfort consists of a Commissioner, a Deputy Commissioner, Executive Secretary, a Staff Attorney, a Fiscal Manager, a Public Information Officer, an IT Manager, Human Resources Branch employees, a Division Director for Cemeteries and a Division Director for Benefits and Field Operations.

A full time dedicated women veterans' program coordinator would be a significant addition to the staff; however, budget cuts have not allowed KDVA to hire for that position. Thus, the women veteran's program duties are a collateral assignment to a woman veteran working for the agency; however, the importance of women veterans to the mission of the military is unmistakable. The Department is committed to addressing the mental and physical health needs unique to our women veterans.

**\*Cemeteries** once fully in place will meet the federal VA's goal to ensure that 90% of Kentucky's veterans live within 75 miles of a veteran's cemetery. The cemeteries inter both casketed and cremated remains involving a dignified burial service with full military honors for all veterans. Eligible dependents (spouses and dependent children) of veterans and active duty service men and women are also interred at Kentucky's State Veterans Cemeteries. While the costs to build the state veteran cemetery are borne by the USDVA, maintenance and daily operational costs are absorbed by the state. In federal FY 2012, the USDVA will contribute \$700 for each veteran interred at the cemeteries - payment of \$300 is requested from the family as an interment fee.

In FY 2011, \$1000.00 was appropriated for the Indigent Veterans Burial Program, providing funds to help cover the cost of funeral arrangements for indigent veterans. KDVA helps provide military funeral honors to all veterans by funding the Burial Honors Program, which gives a small stipend to Veterans Service Organizations for performing honors. The program costs \$130,000 annually to operate.

A major challenge for the Cemeteries Branch is finding suitable land for the fifth and last planned veteran's cemetery to be located in the southeast corner of the state. The federal government does not

fund land acquisition, therefore \$200,000 has been appropriated for land purchase for the southeast cemetery. The other four cemeteries had land donated or funds appropriated for the purchase of land.

**\*Field Operations** staff assists veterans throughout the state in obtaining federal and state benefits they have earned. In 2006, the Governor and Kentucky General Assembly enacted legislation requiring a minimum staffing level of five (5) Veterans Benefits Regional Administrators and twenty (20) Veterans Benefits Field Representatives. Field Representatives are located strategically throughout the Commonwealth to ensure accessibility in that veterans in every Kentucky county have the opportunity to personally meet with a representative. These meetings help to ensure that veterans receive the compensation and pension earned for their active duty service, and they are made aware of the federal and state programs for which they qualify, including VA healthcare.

In 2011, Field Operations implemented the EVet Assist program which allows a veteran in Kentucky to file a claim electronically rather than through burdensome, repetitive paperwork. Implementation of the EVet Assist program was financially supported by the Kentucky Veteran Trust Fund. KDVA also assists veterans' service organizations in training their service officers to ensure that veterans who seek help from these organizations receive quality guidance and representation.

KDVA employs a Homeless Veterans coordinator with a doctoral degree in Psychology and certification in drug and alcohol abuse counseling. This coordinator oversees the Homeless Veterans Transition Facility in Lexington run by the Volunteers of America (VOA) and funded in part by the Department. Further, the coordinator administers the Homeless Veterans Trust Fund, which makes small, one-time payments to veterans and their dependents to keep them in their home or to provide assistance that might help keep them off of the streets.

The coordinator stays abreast of opportunities to help homeless veterans throughout the state. In addition, the coordinator works with government and governmental agencies to improve services and linkages for veterans and their families. The coordinator works with committees and boards to ensure appropriate visibility of veterans needs and to address gaps in service that may contribute to homelessness or conversely prevent homelessness.

**\*Office of Kentucky Veterans Centers (OKVC)** provides long term skilled care for Kentucky residents who are honorably discharged veterans. Three state veteran homes are strategically located throughout the Commonwealth. The Thomson Hood Veterans Center (THVC) is located in central Kentucky in Wilmore, the Paul E. Patton Eastern Kentucky Veterans Center (EKVC) is located in Hazard, and the Joseph E. Ballard Western Kentucky Veterans Center (WKVC) is located in Hanson. The homes currently operate 525 beds for the veterans of Kentucky. A thirty-six (36) bed expansion is currently under construction at WKVC. The completion of the expansion is scheduled for late 2011/early 2012 with the opening anticipated in the spring of 2012. A fourth home is designated to be built in Radcliff, adjacent to the Fort Knox Army Base within the next three (3) years to five (5) years. This newest facility is planned to house one hundred and twenty (120) veterans. The project will be funded through a federal matching grant for state home construction with the USDVA providing 65% and the state to

provide 35% of the total cost of construction. The projected cost of the project is \$40 million dollars. Kentucky is currently allotted 813 beds for USDVA per diem funding.

Veteran nursing home residents are typically disabled, indigent or imminently indigent. The veterans' homes provide health and psychosocial services such as nursing, rehabilitative therapies, therapeutic activities, social services, medical and administrative staff. When veterans are cared for in a state veterans' home, they are eligible for USDVA funding. This funding pays about 40% of the cost of care, making the facility a cost-effective care provider as the same funding is not available to veterans residing in community nursing homes. At this time, the veterans' homes are not Medicare and Medicaid certified.

OKVC relies on funding from three primary sources: federal, state General Fund, and private pay by the veteran resident at the home. In FY 11, the average cost of care per day was \$250.00. This cost will increase as health care costs in general consistently escalate. The federal VA increased its per diem per veteran to \$95.82 for FY 2012. Additional staffing and maintenance operational costs will be associated with the expansion at WKVC expected to open in 2012.

Long term care plans are to complete the thirty-six (36) bed expansion at WKVC in 2012, build a fourth nursing home in Radcliff, and institute electronic medical records in order to improve the quality of healthcare to the veteran – all medical records should be computerized. The Department participates with the Kentucky Health Information Exchange, yet this program is in its infancy stages. Participation in this exchange allows the veterans' homes to access a medical record from a hospital provider other than a VA hospital where a veteran was medically treated.

## **Conclusion**

KDVA employees are immensely devoted and firmly committed to serving those who have served our nation. The mission, vision, and values of our organization are clearly reflected within each organizational entity. We have worked long and hard to establish ourselves within the communities we serve and to brand our organization as one of high standards with great expectations of its employees. We are committed to preserving the integrity that we so diligently worked to attain and consistently strive to uphold, and sustain the high level of care and quality of life services that our staff provides and our veterans deserve.

## **STRATEGIC PLAN PROGRESS REPORT**

### **KENTUCKY DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS – AGENCY NO. 074**

**ORIGINATION DATE: October 2011/REVISION DATE: September 2012**

**Goal 1:** To provide premium advocacy for veterans and increase the percentage of service members in Kentucky receiving VA compensation and benefits earned.

**Objective:** Improve services by implementing a new electronic claims system to file for VA benefits on behalf of veterans; ability to now capture veteran data electronically and mine demographics for statistical purposes.

- a. Increased the number of claims filed in FY 2012 on behalf of veterans due to the new electronic system, EVetAssist, consequently affecting a significant reduction in paperwork and postage.
- b. The EVetAssist electronic claims system allows the Department to determine statistical information such as numbers of veterans served by gender, race, zip code, and other identifying factors.

**Goal 2:** To provide first-class long term care services to veteran residents of our nursing home facilities in a manner that is both cost-effective and mindful of state supported funds.

**Objective:** Increased emphasis on employee safety in the homes and disaster preparedness, which contributes to quality of care for veteran residents. Implementing Medicaid eligibility status for residents, shifting the cost of long term care from the state budget to the federal government – implementation expected to be completed by January 2013. Care for the overall veteran population in KY will expand in 2013 and 2014 (see below).

- a. Through revitalized facility safety committees and implementation of safety incentives, the Department has experienced a significant reduction in workplace injuries and worker compensation costs -- declining from \$1,000,000 to \$450,000 in one year. Veterans Centers staff have received disaster preparedness training.
- b. Department is currently eligible for a \$30,000,000 grant to construct a fourth nursing home in Radcliffe (near Ft. Knox).
- c. The western Kentucky facility expansion project was completed – an addition of 36 beds in a community living center arrangement alongside the main complex to increase quality of life services.
- d. Facility transitions to Medicaid and Medicare are underway.

**Goal 3:** To provide a final resting place and dignified burial services for veterans and their spouses/dependents.

**Objective:** The Department continues to provide quality services by maintaining the utmost care of the veterans' cemeteries and working with families during a time of stress to facilitate the loss of a loved one. Empathy is unquantifiable.

- a. In FY 2011, there were 1006 veteran/dependent burials.
- b. In FY 2012, there were 1045 veteran/dependent burials.

**Goal 4:** To focus on veterans who are "at risk" of becoming homeless in order to reduce veteran homelessness in the state.

**Objective:** KY Homeless Veteran Program continues to assist "at risk" veterans with a one-time, small donation (a rental payment, mortgage payment, telephone bill, heating bill). The program also supports the substance abuse and alcohol program at the VA Lexington clinic operated by the non-profit Volunteers of America. Several classes of forty (40) veterans graduate each year.

- a. In FY 2012, the program addressed the needs of 373 homeless or potentially homeless veterans through disbursement of approximately \$80,000 in assistance.
- b. In FY 2012, there were several graduations of the VOA operated program. Rate of recidivism is low.

**Goal 5:** To assist unemployed veterans with employment opportunities through job fairs and job retraining programs and by furthered support of veteran preference legislation.

**Objective:** Department has participated in numerous veteran job fairs, assisting veterans with employment and VA benefits questions. In FY 2012, Department began collaborating with the federal Veterans Employment and Training (VETS) program in KY to assist veterans with employment opportunities. The program has been strengthened by enhancing career assistance to veterans, such as the Gold Card Initiative. Veterans also use a job search bank to match their skills with employer needs and to find out about job openings.

- a. Veterans' unemployment rate is relatively low in KY but high with the KY National Guard – 5.8% to 17%, respectively.
- b. Two job fairs co-sponsored by KDVA and the KY Veterans Trust Fund served approximately 400 veterans.

- c. KY Veterans Trust Fund gave \$50,000 to the University of Louisville to start a veteran entrepreneurship program. In CY 2012, there will be ten (10) veteran graduates with seed capital for a startup.

**Goal 6:** To focus on a strong partnership with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) and participate in outreach activities that benefit and promote Kentucky veterans.

**Objective:** In FY 2012, supported and participated with a women's veterans health fair at the VA hospital in Louisville. Participated in veterans' returning home focus group with the VA Louisville hospital facility. Works closely with the VARO Louisville and represents veterans statewide with the VA and benefits claims.

- a. In FY 2011, KDVA filed 12,067 benefits claims on behalf of veterans
- b. In FY 2012, KDVA filed 14,158 benefits claims on behalf of veterans.

**Goal 7:** To satisfy internal and external customer needs and enhance qualitative outcomes.

**Objective:** Consistently work with the general public and the Legislative Research Commission to answer veteran related questions, particularly with respect to benefits. Internally, continue to strive for the three core areas (nursing homes, cemeteries, and benefits) of the Department to work synergistically. Continuous improvement of services is the centerpiece of managing the agency.

**Goal 8:** To communicate in a timely and effective manner with the public about Department services.

**Objective:** The Department periodically sends out press releases, highlighting the Department's core services, a new service or project, events, and veteran related legislation. The Department publicizes its services and current activities on a web page and via Facebook.

**Goal 9:** To capitalize on opportunities and maximize efforts toward recruitment and retention of a quality, productive workforce.

**Objective:** To screen personnel properly for hire and promote qualified personnel when there are job openings and the budget permits.

- a. The Department has made provisions for additional scheduling options permissible for 24/7 direct care employees to accentuate the Department's recognition of workforce needs and willingness to work together to accomplish workforce stability and maintain a high level of care and quality of life services.

- b. The Department requested and was approved to establish ten (10) additional part-time nursing positions in an effort to acknowledge the climbing trend for balance in work and family needs. Hiring these additional staff is also expected to minimize turnover, thus creating more stability and a reduction in absenteeism in nursing staff but the effort is too recent to yet quantify in terms of statistical data.
- c. Human Resources staff attended numerous job fairs to meet and greet potential applicants and capitalize on opportunities to recruit, promote our allegiance to workforce needs, and advance agency image. While turnover remains a challenge, it is believed that these efforts have contributed in a manner that prevented its escalation during a new facility's opening in the immediate area.
- d. Many in-house training opportunities are offered for staff ranging from system tutorials and program overviews to individual offerings such as diversity, harassment, and disability awareness training sessions.
- e. Employee service recognition ceremonies are held routinely in an effort to highlight employee tenure and display its value among agency leadership. While somewhat intangible, results are certain to have contributed in a positive manner towards morale in a time of budget deficits and absent cost of living increases.